A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter 17

"No!" Grievous boomed, as his talons sent Esera flying backwards into the padded wall of the ship gymnasium. "Stop leaving yourself open like that!"

Esera coughed and coughed, sounding like the horrible cyborg had before he'd been fixed up. "I'm only Human!" she wheezed.

"You're a Jedi! You can see the future!" said Grievous, shaking his lightsaber at her. He was only using a single blade. Even two was too much for Esera's meager skills. "Look into the future! See where I will strike!"

"I am!" Esera yelled at him. "I can't *physically* move my arms fast enough to block you!"

"Excuses!" Grievous said. "When I was your age, I lost every sparring match until I learned to move faster, and I didn't get to complain about it. You will do the same."

"Where you fighting girls a meter shorter and a hundred kilograms lighter than you too?" Esera muttered. She was a hundred and sixty seven centimeters tall, Grievous probably stood at two hundred and forty, when he was fully upright. Not *quite* enough to be a full meter, but Esera didn't think that made a difference.

"Women fought alongside men, back home," Grievous said, looking off into space. "But they were not Jedi, like you. Your powers make up for your lack of height. Use them!"

Esera reached out with the Force and yanked Grievous by the ankle. He nearly tumbled over, but caught himself, and used his momentum to close the distance between them. His blue blade was held at her throat.

"Better, but not enough!" Grievous said, with a low rumbling laugh. "Dead again, little Jedi. Dooku taught me never to engage unless I had surprise, fear, and intimidation on my side. I often ignored this, to my detriment. But with you, I find I only need intimidation."

"No, you're just too fast," grumbled Esera, pulling herself to her feet. "Are we done yet?"

"One more round," said Grievous, giving her a gleefully malicious look. "Practice will make perfect, as they say!"

That was about as encouraging as he ever got. Every morning, Esera and he dueled. They kept their lightsabers at the lowest power setting, of course, but getting hit still hurt. In the afternoons, Esera did something that should have been much more interesting than it really was: decode Count Dooku's private records.

Unless Esera was missing something, Dooku had been a very boring man. Almost all the information Grievous had recovered from his palace on Serenno was a record of daily affairs, both in his household, his planet, and in the Confederacy. The man had been a meticulous bookkeeper. More interesting were the holocrons Grievous had brought aboard. If there was anything of value to be learned from the dead Sith, it was in those holocrons. And he had been a real Sith, Esera realized. He was using a Sith design of holocron she'd only seen in the archives at the Temple.

Opening the holocrons was proving to be a difficult matter. No one else on the ship could help her, because no one else on the ship was Force sensitive. Only Esera could "look" inside the holocron and see its security measure, and the process by which to unlock it. Except, each holocron's lock was amazingly complex. She'd need to spend days studying just one to even begin understanding it. And that's exactly what Grievous had her do. Esera found his tower's view of space and Raxus too distracting to work, so she started working in her room. But then she found herself burning out on the holocron problem, figuratively running in circles that went nowhere. She limited her time spent on that, and suddenly had no idea what to do herself when she wasn't being ordered around by Grievous. At least down on Raxus, Lirka and Sirka were around to keep her busy. But up in space, she was left to her own devices. Even meditation was useless; the Force was clouded more than it ever had been before.

So, Esera took to wandering *Invisible Hand.* Someone had adjusted her security clearances, because nothing was off limits to her, except the area physically blocked off for reconstruction. Esera soon discovered that many places on the ship were zero-G, and some were even depressurized. In fact, there really wasn't a lot of the ship that was habitable for organics like her. After three days of exploring, Esera had concluded that the only part of the ship meant for organics was a long, narrow set of corridors running between the bridge and the hangar, which contained everything organics needed to live comfortably. Some ran through the middle of the ship, some went to the edge of the hull, where Esera found many deserted – and often damaged – observation decks and other empty passenger suites like hers. The working crew were buried near the middle of the ship in little cubicle-like cells. It was unlike any other ship she'd been on, back in the Republic. She'd become convinced that this type of ship really had been designed for civilian purposes before the war.

While awake, Esera lived a mostly-easy life, but for Grievous's sparring matches. Sleeping was harder. Exhausted of all possible distractions, she spent many hours staring at the ceiling, remembering the worst moments of her life that'd taken place in this war. With her silly Sephi friends busy on the surface, and no friends aboard the Confederate flagship thank to her sympathy towards the enemy, Esera felt herself slipping into a dreary isolation.

Kronaak clicked his claws in excitement, staring into the maw of the hyperspace tunnel. Two days ago he'd sent *Moonraker,* one of his *Recusant*-class destroyers, to the outer edge Kabal system. She'd hid behind an ancient icy planetoid ejected from the inner orbits eons ago, and sent her probes to get a closer look at what was happening down the star's gravity well. And then, the droid-brained *Recusant* had returned, bringing news of a target Kronaak just could not ignore.

A convoy of three dozen ships, mainly rhydonium tankers and bulk freighters, was in orbit, headed to refuel and rearm the Loyalist fleet marshaling at Xagobah for a counterattack on Triton. This convoy would be the last shipment they'd receive this month, due to the logistical chaos Helnurath had caused in the Core...

It would be a shame if something happened to it.

Battleship *Aethra* emerged from hyperspace, with her six escorts right behind her. "Bombers on the frigates, we'll take the star destroyer," Kronaak ordered.

"Roger roger," answered OOM-27.

Hundreds of Vulture droids and Hyena bombers swarmed out of the *Lucrehulk*'s hangars, while the six destroyers concentrated their fire on the lone *Venator* guarding the convoy. There were eight of the small *Arquitens*-class frigates too, but they were so small and poorly armed that the Hyenas would make short work of them. *Now, the* Munificent*, that's a good frigate,* thought Kronaak, watching his droids fly forth. *Long ranged, well-armed, powerful shields, maneuverable, everything a light warship should be.* The Republic had a very poor track record as far as escort ships went. Little did they know that it was the *Consular*-class escorts that had always given the Separatist fighters the most trouble, and they'd stopped production of those three months ago in favor of bigger and bigger star destroyers.

Which would fall all the same, of course. Sheets of red turbolasers soared across thousands of kilometers, bombarding the hapless *Venator* that found itself in the crosshairs of Kronaak's flotilla. Kronaak watched in satisfaction as the shields on the star destroyer began to fail, and its armor began to crack and melt under the onslaught. What didn't satisfy him was how he had to maneuver his gigantic battleship nearly ninety degrees to the side to bring enough guns to bear on his target. The firing arcs on the *Lucrehulk* were abysmal, a relic of its origins as a civilian freighter.

"Tell our lovely ladies to move onto the convoy," Kronaak said. "Board the ships, kill all who resist."

OOM-27 sent the order out, and the six *Recusants* zipped off after the lumbering freighters and tankers preparing to make their jumps to hyperspace. It only took a few minutes before the destroyers were in range to launch boarding pods. Kronaak saw that the *Venator*'s return fire had greatly slowed, its guns must have been taking hits too.

He brought up a three dimensional map of the battle zone, and watched his Hyena bombers chase the Republic frigates. Against capital ships, the *Arquitens* was at least fast and maneuverable, making up for its weak shields and nonexistent armor. Against bombers, it appeared slow and cumbersome, and lacked the guns needed to shoot down more than a handful before they'd made their attack runs. At point blank range, they launched their sixteen proton torpedoes and pulled away in a turn that'd kill any organic pilot. Sixteen torpedoes would only cripple a ship of the *Arquitens*' size, but sixteen torpedoes each from twelve bombers would atomize it. Which is exactly what the Hyenas did to them. The lone *Venator*'s fighters weren't able to handle both the bombers and Vulture droids.

Kronaak was pleased with the results of his self-assigned mission. The escorts were destroyed, the star destroyer was soon to join them, and only six of the convoy ships escaped before the boarding parties took control of them. One of the escaped ships promptly returned minutes later, as the battle droids aboard it forced the crew to turn back.

"Send the tankers to Sluis Van," said Kronaak to OOM-27. "Let me see the manifests of the freighters."

"Some are full of spare parts," OOM-27 reported. "There's a few carrying small arms and ammunition, and one freighter is carrying equipment for an artillery battalion."

"Kabal is one of our systems, isn't it?" asked Kronaak to himself.

"Yes, sir-" 27 tried to say, but Kronaak wasn't talking to him.

"They joined us before the war began and now suffer under Loyalist occupation. Get me in touch with our resistance down there, I have a gift for them." When the Republic returned to Kabal, they'd find the locals even less friendly than before.

A day later, with the rhydonium fuel and several hundred thousand of tons worth of turbolaser capacitors, durasteel armor plates, superconductors, and other assorted useful manufactured goods delivered safely to Sluis Van's shipyards, Kronaak attended the weekly strategy council with General Grievous and the rest of the admiralty.

"Well done, crab-man," said Grievous's hologram. Kronaak was the only living person in the conference room aboard his ship, all the other leading officers were dispersed throughout the galaxy. "Boy Eemon, take what you will of crab-man's plunder for *Cataclysm*."

"Of course, General," Eemon said. Kronaak tapped some buttons on his console, and sent the manifests from the ships over to Eemon. The young Human had been transferred to oversee the final weeks of the super-battleship's fitting out at Minntooine.

"Unfortunately the loss of a single star destroyer and some escorts won't mean much on the galactic scale," Hithlu said. "But it does illustrate just how weak their convoy defenses are."

"Yes, most of the Republic's fleet consists of front-line warships. They don't think they'll need second-line ships when the war ends and they control the galaxy once again." Pors Tonith crossed his arms, and smiled thinly. The Muun's purple-stained teeth showed ever so slightly.

"We need to keep hitting them behind the lines. It's the only place we can do any damage right now," agreed Rame Cartroll. "Rear Admiral Kronaak's raid has delayed their counter attack in the Sluis sector by weeks. That's just the kind of thing we need right now, everywhere!"

"Yes," said Vice Admiral Helnurath, the late Admiral Piast's successor as overall commander of the Serenno theater. Not that were was much left to command. The huge Stenax cut a ferocious figure, and had the personality to match. "There is very little worth defending here. If I could take my fleet into the Republic's heart again-"

"That is enough, Helnurath," Grievous said, raising a hand. "I have been advised not to let Serenno fall into enemy hands. It is the birthplace of this movement. I do not understand this sentiment, but it is the popular will that Serenno be defended."

A strange change had come over Grievous lately, Kronaak had noticed. He had grown less short-tempered, and his outbursts were less violent. And while he didn't shy from berating his commanders for their failures, he certainly wasn't threatening to kill them anymore. Had the coup really changed his perspective that much? Or was there something else going on? Kronaak could not deny that he was slightly concerned.

"Very well," Helnurath growled, pouting like a child. It was an amusing sight to see from such a sinister-looking creature.

"I regret that we have lost our foothold on Kashyyyk," Mar Tuuk said. "While my fleet did capture the traitors alive, its absence allowed the Republic to deliver fresh troops and new supplies to the surface. As we do not have armies to spare for a renewed assault, I have withdrawn our forces to Balamak."

There'd been a falling-out between Grievous and Tuuk. No one said anything about it, but everyone knew. Hithlu was now his equal in rank, rivaling Tuuk for power and influence in the Navy. The General seemed convinced that Tuuk had actually betrayed him in the coup, and had not merely pretended so that he could infiltrate it to take it down from the inside as the rest of the admiralty believed.

"Disappointing," Grievous said, glaring at the Nemoidian. "Hold your ground, then, we will need to return in the future when we liberate Umbara." Another consequence of their disagreement was that Grievous had formally declared it a goal of his to free Umbara.

"Without a fleet at Kashyyyk, the Republic will be free to focus on Boz Pity again," said Kronaak. "They will simply go around our forces at Balamak, through Hutt space."

"A sad reality," said Hithlu. "Ship for ship, we cannot match the Republic. Our strategy should not be meet them on even terms, but to manipulate the situation until we have every possible advantage. We must win every battle before it is even fought. This is where raids like yours and Helnurath's figure in."

"And somehow we have to do this while losing in all theaters of the war," said Alzar Khwaramenes the Givin. He raised a hand and looked at Kronaak and Hithlu. "Before you interrupt, sirs, we have merely set the Republic back in the Sluis and Mayagil sectors. As long as they hold Shumavar, they have an inroad to Atravis, and from there they can easily attack from two fronts."

Grievous suddenly looked off to his side. "What are you staring at?" he asked.

"Sir?" Hithlu raised an eyebrow, but the question wasn't directed at him. Eemon and Kronaak exchanged a glance. Was there someone else with Grievous, wherever he was now? Was there someone listening to the Confederacy's admiralty discussing the strategic situation of the war?

"An... agent of mine has been to Shumavar recently, it would seem," Grievous said. *Perhaps this is the mysterious agent that helped him take the Raxus array,* thought Kronaak. There'd been much speculation on his or her identity. No one had even been aware Grievous had such agents out in the galaxy. And now Kronaak knew they might be listening in at every meeting. "She believes everyone loyal to our cause on Shumavar is dead."

"That very well could be the case. Reconnaissance indicated several cities were destroyed by orbital bombardment some few weeks ago," said Khwaramenes. "But it remains a potentially valuable location."

"Speaking of value," Eemon spoke up, "I have an idea."

"Then speak," Grievous commanded.

"The Corporate Sector," said Eemon, indicating it on their war-map of the galaxy. "In fact, everything up here on the final leg of the Hydian Way, between Listehol and Bonadan. This has been in the Republic's hands the entire war, and we've done nothing about it. And the Shaltin Tunnels lead down to our ally, Zygerria, and then to Lianna, one of our own systems. If we seize both, we can have a direct link to Serenno that will not pass through any enemy or neutral territory."

"The Corporate Sector is off-limits," said Pors Tonith. "Our backers would not approve of an attack on that region. They have significant investments there."

"Who cares about them?" Helnurath asked. "They betrayed us! Off with their heads!"

"And nationalize their assets!" Eemon added on. "Think of the wealth that'd be ours, General! Billions and billions of credits, all put to use funding the war and fueling our economy, instead of sitting in some tycoon's vault!"

"Sir, you do realize that will throw the galactic economy into chaos, do you not?" asked Tonith.

"Nationalization?" sputtered Cartroll. "The Confederacy is not supposed to be an autocracy!"

"Desperate times, desperate measures," Eemon remarked. "Worry about the luxury of freedom after we've secured our existence."

"There is a boot stamping down on the face of the galaxy," Cartroll said, glowering, "and your solution is to fight it with another boot? Those who sacrifice freedom for security lose both and deserve neither. We cannot throw away our democracy and rights in the face of the Republic's kleptocratic tyranny! We will become the very thing we swore to destroy!"

"Then I will ask Congress to nationalize them," said Grievous, giving Cartroll an annoyed look. "Would that sooth your *ideals?*"

"That would be... marginally better, if such an act had a democratic mandate," said Cartroll.

In the old days, Grievous would have met Cartroll's anger with his own. Instead, the cyborg seemed only inconvenienced by it. *Very interesting,* thought Kronaak.

"There will be many who will oppose such an act," Tuuk said. "And while you have their leadership arrested, their lackeys will be ready to pull out everything at a moment's notice if it looks like you'll be coming for them too. Move swiftly and quietly, General."

"I did not ask you," Grievous said coldly.

"I suppose economic chaos is better than defeat," Tonith sighed. The Muun must have been cringing at all the stocks that were about to tank. If such a thing did happen, there was no guarantee it would. Then again, Kronaak knew little about galactic economics.

"More chaos!" Helnurath said, slamming his fist on his table, on his end of the transmission. "Chaos is where we thrive! The Republic is so obsessed with order and bureaucracy, they don't know how to function when it's gone!"

"It's going to effect us too, you idiot," growled Tonith. "I hope you don't have any money in the bank."

"My only wealth is what I carry with me," the Stenax answered. "And that is only what I take from my enemies."

"Once a pirate, always a pirate," muttered Cartroll.

"Silence," Grievous cut in. "Several weeks ago I asked you all to find more competent officers. Admiral Hithlu has, I see. I am expecting the same from the rest of you."

The meeting continued, moving into more mundane matters that Kronaak mostly tuned out. Lifeform resources wasn't his department in the slightest.

The meeting lasted hours. In the end, Grievous adjourned the meeting when his organic underlings began to grow visibly tired. Even the Jedi girl had given up on listening in and retreated back down the tower to the rest of the ship. The Confederate Fleet's atrophying of leadership had to be stopped, though. Luckily not all his men had been idle. Unluckily, for the moment, the old T-series tactical droids were having to fill in roles far beyond their programming. The super tactical droids were far too complex for large-scale production, and numbered only in the dozens. But that issue could wait, young Ricimer Eemon had requested a private audience.

"What could be so important that you needed to speak to me alone?" Grievous asked to his hologram.

"General, you and I both know you have no patience for sugarcoating. You were blindsided by the coup," said Eemon. "And if it happened once, it can happen again."

"You have a solution?" asked Grievous.

"Yes," Eemon said. "But the others won't like it."

"Then you have my attention."

"On Caramm, order is kept by a special... agency. A secret police, you could call them. We call them the skerianas. Tearers, in our language," said Eemon.

"Terrors?"

"Tearers. Because they tear you from your life and make you disappear. Sometimes forever." Eemon clasped his hands together, and looked thoughtful. "Though, terrors also works perfectly well. Their job is to end any threat to the government before it begins. Dissidents, traitors, spies, they root them all out."

"That sounds useful," said Grievous. "What do they do with them?"

"Imprisonment, torture, execution, usually," said Eemon. "My father likes to say we have the best torturers in the galaxy. I'm not sure that's something to be proud of... But they've foiled multiple plots against him, and before the war caught every spy the Republic's Judicial Forces sent to our world."

"Hah!" Grievous laughed. "As if the Republic were in any position to judge!"

"Sir," Eemon said, looking quiet serious, "I've caught three Loyalist spies at Minntooine already. If our foremost shipyard is that infiltrated, I worry about the state of the rest of the Confederacy. We could be more compromised than we know. That's why we're talking privately on a channel using Carammite encryption, not Confederate."

Now it was Grievous's turn to get serious. He leaned forward. "What are you trying to tell me?" he asked.

"For years, a man named Clothar Aclinde commanded the skerianas, on Caramm and beyond it. He fled the system when my father believed he was getting too powerful, but I still maintain contact with him. I believe Aclinde can clean house, so to speak. There's no one better at catching subverters and spies than him."

Afterwards, Grievous considered Eemon's words. The thought of everything they were doing here ended up in the Republic's hands bothered him. But the label of *best torturers in the galaxy* did have a certain appeal to it... During the war on Kalee, collaborators had met a face worse than death. Grievous had helped inflict some of those fates. Anyone collaborating with the Republic also deserved such a fate, in his mind. He resolved to find this Aclinde. In the mean time, Grievous asked the current Congress leader to vote nationalizing the traitorous corporations' assets. The serpent was the one in charge down there, wasn't he? Grievous didn't really care, as long as they did what he wanted them to do.

Since he didn't need to sleep, Grievous just kept on working through the third watch cycle of the ship, when the fewest crew were awake. Not that anyone but the Jedi girl ever bothered him when he was in his tower. He hated to even think it, but she was the closest one to a friend he had on the ship. But Grievous would never befriend a Jedi. One such as himself did not need friends. Especially not a Jedi friend. And yet, her presence did not offend him. She was even proving useful.

"I hate this holocron!" she fumed one day, while helping him uncover Dooku's secrets. The girl tossed the little pyramid across the room, glaring at it from where she sat cross-legged on top of his desk.

"Be careful with that," Grievous said. He'd already chided for occupying his workspace, but she refused to stand at attention for hours if he wanted her help.

"I've tried everything on it! But it just won't open, even when I've undone every lock inside!" She reached out with the Force and pulled the holocron back into her hands. "I'm so fed up with this thing! I just want to-"

And then, Grievous heard a *click* from the holocron. He tilted his head, and twitched his ear-antennae. The Jedi girl looked stupefied.

"Well," she said, composing herself. "Maybe I shouldn't be surprised I needed to use my anger to open it. Of course I did, it's dark side technology..."

"What's in it?" Grievous asked.

"Only one way to find out." The girl worked her Force magic, and a hologram appeared. Two holograms, rather. One was Dooku, and one was a hooded man. *Sidious,* Grievous thought.

"*Master,*" Dooku's recording said, kneeling in submission.

"*Darth Tyranus,*" rasped the voice of Sidious, which Grievous hadn't heard in nearly two months. "*The end of the war is in sight.*"

"*Yes, master,*" said Dooku. "*Grievous has won victory after victory in the Inner Rim and Core, the Republic is crumbling under the strain.*"

"This was eight months ago," Grievous said. The girl watched, silent and troubled.

"*He is too close to Coruscant,*" Sidious told his apprentice. "*The Jedi are not yet where I want them. We are entering the next phase of the plan. Summon Grievous, we must spread the Jedi and the Republic thin across the Outer Rim.*" The recording stopped.

"Sidious told me to retreat," said Grievous. "He wanted the Republic fleets to be drawn away from Coruscant, so I could strike it and kidnap the Chancellor. He promised this was the last phase of the war... But what did he mean about the Jedi?"

"Sidious must have had a lot of power in the Senate," the Jedi girl said. "The older Jedi spoke about a Sith lord manipulating the Senate, but to actually know that was true..." She shuddered. "I'm not surprised you're taking orders from the Sith, though. I don't think I can work for you if this Darth Sidious is your master."

"Hah!" Grievous shook his head. "I have not heard from Sidious since I brought the Chancellor aboard this ship. I think something happened to him during the battle."

"Oh," the girl said. She blinked. "Well. That's interesting. So... You're on your own? You're not taking orders from anyone?"

"No," Grievous said. "I will never take orders again."

"Alright, then, I can live with that," said the Jedi girl. "Let's see what else is in this holocron..."

There were a lot of recordings between Dooku and Sidious on this one, but they only spanned from eight months ago to six months ago. Almost all of them had to do with manipulating the war, and the more Grievous saw, the more he disliked what he saw.

"*Master,*" Dooku said to Sidious in the penultimate recording on the holocron. "*The Republic fleets are advancing too quickly on Druckenwell. If the planet falls now, the rest of the theater will likely follow in only a few months, far ahead of schedule.*"

"*You are correct, Tyranus,*" said Sidious. "*Things are moving too fast in the Outer Rim. Making Grievous's retreat look believable has left us open. I will initiate another round of voting in the Senate for opening negotiations through Amidala,"* Sidious sneered as he said her name, *"and have the Republic halt its advance as a show of good faith. When your forces are in position, do something offensive to Jedi sensibilities. I leave it to you.*"

"I knew it!" Grievous said, clenching his fists. "They were conspiring to draw out the war! But why?"

"Isn't that the question of the day," the Jedi girl said quietly. Her wide eyes stared at the floor. "Senator Amidala knew Darth Sidious. He was someone she knew personally. He was working *through* her."

"Amidala?" asked Grievous. "That name is familiar."

"She's one of the big pro-peace politicians on Coruscant," said the girl. "Up there with Bail Organa and Mon Mothma. I can't believe Sidious had her ear! How could she be listening to a Sith lord?"

"All politicians are criminals," Grievous reminded the girl.

The final recording was a little different, a message from Sidious that Dooku had not received in person.

"*Tyranus, come to Stygeon Prime at once. The time has come to deal with my former apprentice, once and for all.*"

That was it. The girl looked confused, but Grievous knew exactly what it was about.

"Who was his former apprentice?" asked the girl.

"Maul," Grievous growled. "I do not know his story, only that he was thought dead on Naboo, ten years before the war began. He caused us no end of trouble."

"Naboo, ten years before-" Her voice caught in her throat. "He's the Sith lord that Master Jinn and Master Kenobi fought! I was only a little girl then but I heard about-"

"Yes, that's him," said Grievous. "Sidious, Dooku and I destroyed his powerbase months ago, and now the Republic is occupying Mandalore. That was all he had left. He's either brooding in some dark corner of the galaxy or in the Jedi's hands now."

"If Dooku's dead, and Sidious is dead, that means Maul is the last of the Sith." The Jedi girl looked thoughtful. "They're nearly extinct, for real this time."

Grievous had the girl get to work on the other holocrons, now that she knew the trick to opening them. It was still a complicated procedure and would take a few days to crack them open, but at least it was a guarantee now. *I wish I knew what Maul has been up to,* he thought. The fallen Sith wasn't exactly a threat in terms of raw power, but he was smart. *I need more spies!* Grievous would definitely find Clothar Aclinde of Caramm. Spies and secret police, both would be of great service to him in the coming days.

The success of opening the holocron inspired Esera. It was the first time since she'd come aboard Grievous's ship that she'd accomplished anything. And if she could open a Sith holocron, she could do anything!

Even access the holonet, unsupervised.

Do I do it? Esera wondered. Dare she enter the mysterious and dangerous realm of perverse degeneracy and reckless troublemakers that was the holonet? The fact that it wouldn't actually be *the* holonet she would be using occurred to her as well. The Separatists had their own networks of privately-owned and unregulated shadowfeeds. They could be even worse than the holonet. *Well, I've come this far...* Her official Confederate passport had arrived last week. Esera was now truly a Separatist. She might as well use their communications network, right? If it was to better understand the people and state she now owed allegiance to, it would be justified.

"Alright, here I go," Esera said to herself, sitting down at the terminal, switching the display to 2D before anything else. They didn't have 3D at the Temple, Esera wasn't used to it. It didn't open to a main navigation menu like the holonet terminals at the Temple. Instead, she saw the most bare-bones interface she'd ever seen: a list of network names, and nothing else. As she scrolled down, she realized that what she'd heard on Terminus had been right: there were hundreds of shadowfeed networks. She chose one at random.

A simple search function appeared before her. Well, that was better than stumbling onto something unsavory immediately, at least. 'Clone war' was Esera's first search, returning several billion hits. 'Clone war news' was her second, returning just as many. All of them, as far as she could tell, were articles and videos from millions of independent news sources around the galaxy. No human, or anything else with a human-like brain, could ever sort through all of it. 'Stalimur' was her third search. Only a few million hits this time. 'Stalimur news,' even fewer hits. 'Stalimur war news,' and that was down to just a few thousand. Esera had to hand it to whomever owned this network, it was far faster than the official holonet.

One return caught her eyes: it wasn't an actual news source, but a discussion. Someone had posted an article titled *Stalimur Launches First Frigate: Locally-Built Warship to Join Anti-Privateer Operations in the Black Spiral.* All the following posts delved into questions about technical details and construction methods... Esera checked the title of the shadowfeed site she was on, and to no surprise, it was called *starships·tion*. It must have been a site for starship enthusiasts of the Tion Cluster to gather...

Esera returned to the search page, and started looking for more things related to her homeworld. By the looks of it, her people were doing well. The war had brought billions of credits in investments, and millions of new jobs as the Techno Union and Corporate Alliance built new factories and shipyards. And those brought new jobs too, in the service industry. And who else to feed these new workers than the farmers, who now had the capital to expand their operations and purchase modern agricultural technology? Unemployment was practically gone, but for those who could not physically work. Hunger and poverty were on the retreat, school enrollment was up three hundred percent. For the first time in generations, Stalimur's birthrate was positive. Esera felt a warm feeling in her heart. Even in the midst of this dark war, there was still some good shining through.

'Komara' was Esera's next search. There were over two hundred thousand people with that family name on Stalimur. There were fifteen hundred Esera Komaras on the planet. 'Esera Komara Jedi' brought up one hit, a fourteen year old article about a Jedi visiting Stalimur and taking a certain Esera Komara back to the Temple on Coruscant. The child had lived in the equatorial city of Veldevale, in the shadow of a space elevator's anchor. Esera had vague memories of a great tower looming over her and tapering away into the sky. Now she knew what it really was. A few more searches in genealogical archives and newsfeeds told her the story of her family. Her mother and father had died in an epidemic of red fever, just a few years after Esera had left them. Maira, her elder sister, had married a man who was now an officer aboard the very frigate Esera had read about earlier. Her elder brother, Toren, was a schoolteacher.

I hope it was quick, Esera thought. Her parents were more memories of feelings than actual people to her. Her master's death had been far more painful than theirs. But still, she did feel a sense of loss to hear that they'd passed. Her brother and sister were alive and well, though. Esera would focus on that. She still had a family! One of these days, she'd visit them. And on the subject of family, another thing occurred to Esera:

I should look up Kalee, she thought. Republic Intelligence believed that was Grievous's home planet. So, 'Kalee' she searched for, and found only a few dozen results. That wasn't surprising, Kalee was so obscure that no one at the Temple had ever heard of it until it was brought up in the briefings on Grievous. Even then, no one really cared about it, there was almost no information on it in the public records... the only records the Jedi could easily access, without special permission.

'Battle of Kalee thread #196' was the first result, on a site called *m11talk·rax*. What m11 was, Esera could not fathom, but talk clearly meant it was a social site hosted on Raxus. Perhaps these people were academics, or journalists following events in remote places?

The interface was almost as primitive as the shadowfeed list. The top post was a list of recent events, all on or near Kalee. There was a slew of gains and losses at locations all across the planet, as well as names of commanders and leaders that she would have never known existed unless she'd come here. A rotating image of a globe showed the current front lines on Kalee; Esera could zoom in or out and turn it at will.

That was all normal. What wasn't normal were the posts following it. Esera couldn't even begin to make sense of what was going on here; it was as if they weren't even speaking the same language. Many posts had static images attached; pictures of aliens she could only assume were Kaleesh, pictures of droids, pictures of ramshackle vehicles and homemade weapons and characters from an animated show Esera knew was popular with children on Republic worlds. There were actually a lot of such seemingly unrelated pictures. *What is all this?* she wondered. What did a certain shockball player's comical expression of disbelief have to do with the battle on Kalee? Was the poster trying to get across some kind of emotion?

guys, when is operation southern storm happening, i've been up all night waiting, one post said.

Soon! the next poster promised.

Whenever Zharajayn gets bored of making ghurak out of huk at dyaral, good kettles can only happen at the right moment, said the next. Then another post followed:

If you see this post, you have been visited by the KHAGAN ZHARAJAYN, chosen by the gods, master of kettles, commander of the kolkpraviin, and cook of huks! Brilliant encirclements, high protein fried huk, and dead jedi will come to you, but only if you reply with "Zharajayn, kettle!" to this post.

ZHARAJAYN KETTLE KETTLE KETTLE, the first replier ranted. It was followed by a long chain of posts wishing this Zharajayn kettle, whatever that meant. Esera was confounded. She was even more confounded when she looked at the location tags of all these posters. Not a single one was from Kalee. Indeed, there were several posters posting from inside the Republic!

"I'm so confused," sighed Esera. She tapped the reply button on the screen, and filled out a response form. "Name... Esera. Race... Human. Gender... female. Show cosmographic location... yes?"

Who is Khagan Zharajayn and why does he kettle? There. Posted. Now, to hope someone answered-

hahahaha

Nice bait, sweetie.

Wow, I didn't know there was a Confederate Navy HP! How'd you get that?

How can you be on m11 and not know who zharajayn is, the guy's a legend here

Kettle is his ultimate attack, and Zharajayn is my future husband, you stay away from him "Esera"!

your implying kaleesh master race would ever bed some slimy greasy human. This was the same poster who had first replied to her question with written-out laughter, their location was listed as Charros.

Friend, specieism is why we're fighting the Republic, don't bring that garbage here.

im not being specist? humans just have greasy skin compared to kaleesh! answered the Charran poster.

The conversation degenerated into a back-and-forth between the Charran and several other posters. Esera's question was forgotten. These people weren't academics or journalists at all! *They're insane*, Esera decided. She went to get some food from the mess hall.

By the time she came back, she noticed she had actually gotten a serious reply:

I'm going to assume you're just very new, given that you bothered filling out all the information forms. Though I'm curious as to why your location is listed as Confederate Navy... Anyways, Zharajayn is the (supposed) champion of the gods and Khagan of Kalee. He's basically the successor to Qymaen (who we're 95% sure is related to our own General Grievous somehow). Long story short, Khagan Qymaen's shuttle got bombed by the Jedi after the huk broke the peace treaty, he and his izvoshra were presumed dead. Except one, the guy who became Grievous (probably), but that's another story. Zharajayn was just some guy back then. Anyways, Zharajayn humiliated the jedi, huk, and clone army in the north two years ago. Despite being outgunned and outnumbered, he outmaneuvered the loyalist invaders and crushed them in a 'kettle.' See the attached image.

It was a crude sketch of two armies; one was surrounding another on three and a half sides, with only a narrow passage remaining as an escape route. There was a video file attached too. *Basically,* the poster went on, *Zharajayn nearly surrounded the loyalists and subjected them to constant bombardment and attack in an increasingly small area, leaving them only one way out...*

Esera didn't really care about the strategies, or even really about who Zharajayn was. But the fact that this Khagan Qymaen had supposedly died when the Jedi bombed his shuttle... *That* was exactly the same story Grievous had told about his transformation into a cyborg. Grievous just wasn't related to Qymaen... He *was* Qymaen. Esera leaned back in her chair, and exhaled. Of all the places to discover Grievous's identity, it was a war-watching forum full of idiots on a holonet-knockoff. The Force was truly guiding her.

It all makes sense, Esera thought, watching the video the poster had provided. It was scenes of Zharajayn's victorious battle set to a rhythmic drumbeat accompanied by a simple but passionate song, with subtitles provided. *You are not my equal oh Jedi invader, even if you brought the whole universe, you would not find a match for me,* the song went. *In our Gods and in our land is our strength, victory is Heaven's promise to the righteous!*

That last line... Grievous had said those very words, on Raxus, just a few weeks ago. As the song repeated those words in the final verse, the video showed Kaleesh warriors on top of a wrecked AT-TE, scorched Republic roundel highly visible, and raising their flag. It was a white banner, bearing the same black symbol Grievous had on the back of all his cloaks, the same symbol he'd put on the flag hoisted at the spaceport. *Victory is heaven's promise to the righteous!*

Author's note: Esera on the internet- I mean holonet- I mean shadowfeed! If that bit was too close to reality for you, I apologize, but I had fun writing it, and the ultimate reason I write is because I enjoy writing. So sorry, but not sorry. I am still open to all critique, though. I've noticed some people have mentioned there are things they don't like about the story or my writing, but they don't elaborate unless I ask them privately. No need to be shy, I'm a big boy, tell me what you didn't like and why you didn't like it! See you guys in three weeks.

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